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ABSTRACT

The task of making a career decision can seem daunting for many young people. Careers do not always follow a straightforward, logical trajectory, and chance events can define or change the course of one's career path. Youth may benefit from a learning environment designed to guide the imagining and inventing of their future. A wide range of experiential exercises can be used to invite clients to "construct their own selves." Kolb's experiential model would seem to offer one framework for constructivist counselors to use in developing a range of experiential activities, including case study approaches. Case study approaches can promote the brainstorming of possibilities and can encourage young people to take a role in learning by stimulating their curiosity. When young people learn to creatively think about the possibilities for other youths' lives, they are more likely to apply the process to their own lives. (Contains 11 references.) (Author)

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A New Twist: Fostering Creative Career Exploration in Young People

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You will come to a place where the streets are not marked
Some windows are lighted. But mostly they're darked.
A place you could sprain both you elbow and chin!
Do you dare to stay out? Do you dare to go in?
How much can you lose? How much can you win?
Dr. Seuss (1990)

Adolescence is closely associated with the process of identity development (Erikson, 1968) and many researchers have suggested that this is a period of particular stress and confusion, especially when adolescents are undergoing physical and cognitive changes (Stratton, 2000). As adolescents experiment with various "possible selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1986), they turn to adults, often parents, for information about the world of work. However, results from two studies, one in Ottawa (Stratton) and the other in rural British Columbia (Shepard, 2002), indicate that many young people are not accessing other sources of information, for example, school counsellors and career development material. In spite of this situation, adolescents are concerned about their futures. They want to acquire a job they like, they question whether they can afford the cost of college or university, and they wonder if they have accumulated the high school credits necessary to follow their dreams (Stratton).

Career programs are often built around the premise that young people should conduct their search and choice in a methodical, reasoned manner. Through the process of acquiring, synthesizing, evaluating, and reducing the array of information and alternatives, young people are assured that they will come to a decision point that reveals the best course of action. Yet, in a world filled with change and ambiguity, young people question if choosing a career path is that simple (Shepard, 2002).

Career counsellors are challenged to foster an active approach to career exploration for youth that is planful and purposeful and yet provides opportunities to be open to unplanned, serendipitous events. Gelatt (1989) suggests that subjectivity, reflexivity, and creativity must accompany attempts to cope with information overload and decision-making. Flexibility, adaptability, and tentative commitment are required in an uncertain world.
"The future does not exist and cannot be predicted. It must be imagined and invented....One must invent the future or let someone else invent it. The choice of action is where the decision makers express their individuality; it should not be done by formula." (Gelatt, 1989:255)

In order to encourage the use of a variety of thinking processes, including logical and creative thinking, young people must first understand why they need to learn something. When they can see how the task applies to their own lives, they are more likely to become engaged in and take responsibility for their learning. The use of real-life case studies in a group approach can provide young people with skills needed to make plans and to be open to new opportunities and perspectives. Inspirational case studies can provide opportunities for youth to exploit their experience as a resource, to link their readiness to learn with real-life situations, and to orient their learning by life tasks.

A case study approach allows youth the freedom to let their imaginations roam, to open up new areas of exploration and to tap into the creative parts of themselves by letting go filtering inner voices. Reading another youth's story, with its human qualities, challenges and uncertainties, can draw youth in, connecting them on an emotional and cognitively curious level, developing empathy and a feeling of connectedness. Brainstorming possibilities for another person can tap into youths' creative energy. Encouraging a non-filtering attitude where all ideas are welcomed can invite humour and engagement. The process is designed to provide a tool for exploration that youth can ultimately apply to their own life situation.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Model

Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand. Confucius

From a constructivist counselling perspective, a wide range of experiential exercises can be used to invite clients to "construct their own selves through the interpretations they make and the actions they take" (Peavy, 1995: 2). Kolb's (1984) experiential model offers one framework for constructivist counsellors to develop a range of experiential activities, including case study approaches. Kreber (2001) has suggested that a case study approach can foster an active role in learning that promotes student involvement and active experimentation, and self-directed learning. In

essence, case studies can be used to involve students in the four learning phases in Kolb's experiential learning model.

Kolb's model (1984) is based on the idea that learning must be grounded in experience and that this experience needs to be complemented by reflection. The model consists of two dimensions: prehension of experience and transformation of experience. The prehension dimension refers to how individuals grasp information from their environment. Information can be gathered through apprehension or felt qualities (e.g., intuitive, creative, and implicit understanding) and through comprehension or conceptual interpretation of the environment (e.g., reliance on logical analysis). The transformation dimension explains how individuals learn or process the information they gather. Learning takes place whenever an experience is transformed via internal reflection (e.g., formulating possibilities) or active manipulation of the external world (e.g., an Internet search).

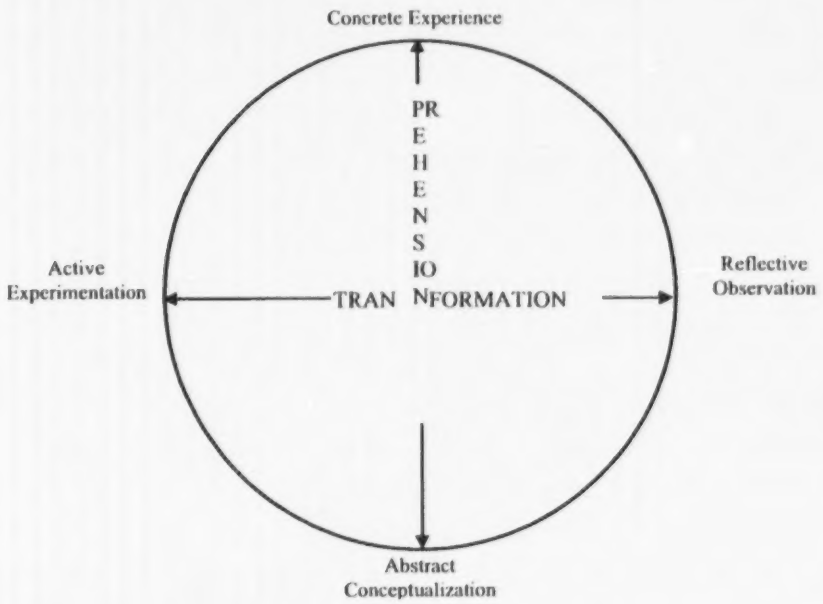

Fig.1. Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning

The two dimensions form four phases of learning: concrete experience (CE), abstract conceptualization (AC), reflective observation (RO), and active experimentation (AE). Concrete experiences involve immersion in the immediacy of the moment, relying on intuitive and affective responses to an event. In a case study, CE occurs immediately after the initial reading of or listening to the story. In this phase youth are asked, "What are your first impressions or your sense of what is going on? What are your feelings or intuitions about the person or situation? Abstract conceptualization requires logical thinking and rational evaluation.

In the AC phase, youth attempt to understand the situation and begin to analyze and evaluate the information and identify information needed. Reflective observation calls for a tentative, impartial perspective towards the situation and a readiness to consider alternatives. The RO phase invites the formulation of possibilities with an emphasis on creativity and a non-judgmental openness to everyone's ideas, opinions, and points of view. Active experimentation emphasizes action and participation, with an emphasis on practical application of what has been learned. Here youth participate in finding information, assessing what would really work and exploring areas that need to be pursued, for example potential career areas. Kolb's model is not linear, but requires participants to cycle back and forth among

the four phases as needed. However, learning only becomes experiential when participants progress through all four phases.

Creating Case Studies

Case studies based on the real-life stories of young people provoke youth involvement and active experimentation with an issue. Readers are drawn into the study and make connections with their own experience and emotions. Questions are raised that invite further exploration. Skills necessary for self-directed learning are fostered. In times of rapid social, technological, and workforce changes, learning of mere content or factual knowledge is time-limited. The flexibility, adaptability and creativity fostered by case study approaches provide young people with skills that will help them over their lifetime. Young people take an active role in exploring and defining potential career paths; realize that creative approaches to life-career options are needed more than linear, step-by-step approaches; appreciate the possibilities that can arise out of the uncertainty and ambiguity of life; and recognize that chance events and serendipity often play a role in life-career decisions. A good case study tells a story, raises thought-provoking issues; has elements of conflict or tension, promotes empathy with the main character, lacks a clear-cut answer; encourages questions for further exploration or research, is relatively concise; contains cues that stimulate elaboration, occurs in a context relevant to youth's future, and includes the plausibility and messiness of real life. The ultimate goal is for young people to apply the case study model to their own life stories.

The case studies used in our study are loosely based on real-life individuals and therefore have outcomes. It has been observed by the authors that participants want to know the outcome and that learning the outcome contains an inspirational aspect for participants, as well as a feeling of completion of the cycle. Youth draw inspiration from seeing where the paths taken by case study individuals have lead, as well as seeing how chance events and serendipity may have played a role in the chosen career path. The outcome can also demonstrate that career decision-making is an ongoing process and not necessarily a linear path.

Applying Kolb's Experiential Learning Model to a Case Study

Large Group Work

As a first step, spend time developing group norms, for example, respect others' opinions, carry your own weight, assist each other in staying on track, explore different points of view, and include all members. Provide experience with the case study approach by walking through one with the large group. Read the case aloud and record their initial reactions (CE phase) on flip chart paper. Remind participants of the key concepts in this phase when they start to shift into another phase.

Table 1: Applying Kolb's Model to Case Studies for Youth

Kolb's Four Learning Phases	Key Concepts at each Phase	De Bono Hat Colour
♦ CONCRETE EXPERIENCE (C.E.) • read through the case	• processing at an intuitive level • felt sense • initial reaction • implicit understanding	Red
♦ ABSTRACT CONCEPTUALIZATION (A.C.) • apply logic and ideas to case	• understanding the problem/situation • identify factors and analyze • identify information needed • identify areas to pursue	White Green Blue
♦ REFLECTIVE OBSERVATION (R O.) • provide different points of view, state opinions • discussion	• patience • openness • careful non-judgment • formulating possibilities	Green Yellow
♦ ACTIVE EXPERIMENTATION (A.E.) • take a practical approach • fieldwork	• assessing what really works • finding missing information • exploring areas that need to be pursued • stresses action	White Green Blue Black

Next hand out a copy of the case to each participant, allow time to revisit the case, and then move into the second phase (AC) Encourage participants to articulate their understanding of the problem or situation. Assist them in identifying key points and areas they would pursue if they could talk with this person. Continue to record responses. Before moving into the third phase, revisit the prehension dimension (CE and AC) for additional responses and ideas. Create a list of information needed by the main character in the case study.

In the third phase (RO) prompt students with key words, for example, "anything goes", "just say what comes to mind," etc. Encourage a wide variety of viewpoints and opinions. In the AE phase, have participants suggest a list of actions to be taken by the main character. Where could this character access that information? If there is time, assign participants to each task, for example, find training opportunities for someone interested in photo-journalism.

Small Group Work

- Remind participants of group norms.
- Assign a recorder for each group. Read through the case aloud to the groups.
- Process at an intuitive level (CE). What are your initial reactions?
- Apply logic and ideas to the case (AC). What are the main issues? What further information is needed?
- Provide different points of view (RO). Brainstorm alternative possibilities and strategies. Evaluate each alternative and as a group select the best alternative.
- Seek out and apply information to the case (AE) and develop an implementation plan.
- Share with other groups.

Case Study Example

Jim is an 18-year-old male living in a small town in the interior of BC. His mother is First Nations and his father is Caucasian. Jim's father left when he was very young and so Jim has never really known him. Jim was raised by his mother on the reserve. When he was young, his mother would occasionally work cleaning houses or waitressing.

Jim's interests include listening to heavy metal or rap music. He loves and is very skilled at drawing. His passions are skateboarding and snowboarding, and he is a talented and fearless snowboarder who loves to take risks.

Jim has excellent people skills because he is a good listener and observer of human nature. Nevertheless, he prefers to do what he wants to do and it is hard for him to compromise. This independence sometimes affects his schoolwork because Jim tends to resist studying things that either aren't of interest to him or that don't seem relevant to his life. He has hovered around the C-level in high school, just getting through.

When Jim was 14, his mother met another man (Caucasian). They married, and he moved to the reserve to live with Jim and his mother. Jim's stepfather is an electrical contractor. There was a lot of conflict between the stepfather and Jim, and Jim was finding it hard to deal with having another permanent male in the household.

By grade 11, Jim had become very rebellious and a lot of conflict had developed both at home and at school. Jim was skipping school and spending a lot of time snowboarding. The school and his family were concerned because it looked like Jim was going to drop out of school if nothing changed, a move that would heavily impact Jim's future options.

What do you think would encourage Jim to stay in school and what career options do you think Jim could consider and/or explore?

Tossing in the Hats and Other Twists

As participants gain experience with the case study approach, layers of complexity can be added, for instance, the Six Thinking Hats (de Bono, 1995). Imagine a thinking hat that you can put on or take off. The six hats of different colours represent every basic type of thinking. The hats can be matched with the different phases on Kolb's model. For instance during the CE phase, participants can engage in red hat thinking. The red hat suggests feelings or emotions and warmth. The red hat gives you full permission to put forward your hunch or intuition without having to justify it or explain it. The white hat brings to mind paper and draws attention to available or missing information. When wearing this hat, participants might ask, "What information do we need?" The green hat makes space available for creative thinking. Under the green hat you offer ideas, suggestions, possibilities and alternatives without judgment or filtering. Yellow hat thinking is positive thinking and reinforces creative thinking. When wearing the yellow hat, participants would list benefits of something and reasons why it would work. Blue indicates the management of thinking process itself, somewhat like the conductor of an orchestra. Questions are raised such as, "What have we achieved so far?" and "What should we do next?" The black hat denotes caution, and helps us avoid doing things that might be harmful. Black hat thinking is very important but should not be overused. Six hat thinking improves the ability to move from one type of thinking to another. Party hats can be purchased and used by participants to provide a visual and kinesthetic reminder of their current thinking mode.

Facilitators can provide opportunities for incorporating serendipitous events into the case studies by circulating among the groups with the "Chance Hat." Write positive, neutral, and negative life events on file cards. As groups are concluding the AE phase, ask them to draw an event from the hat and to incorporate that event into their action plan. Youth can be encouraged to provide their small group with a self-written personal case study. Kolb's model and the six thinking hats approach can be applied to their life-story. Young people may develop new perspectives, recognize their struggles, identify strengths and supports, and construct action plans when they hear other's ideas and suggestions.

Case studies do not need to be limited to the written word. Characters in film clips can provide interesting and valuable cases. What career areas could Sam-wise in "Lord of the Rings" consider? The music of Tracey Chapman ("Cold Feet") and Avril Lavigne ("Skater Boy") also provide life stories that encourage engagement by young people.

Challenges When Applying the Case Study Approach

Although the case study approach has been used successfully with many young people aged 16 to 21, some participants were challenged by the format. Not all young people have the necessary cognitive skills to work through the four phases. They may need more practice time. Forming mixed ability and age groups can provide support as the young person develops new skills. Others may have difficulty coping with the freedom to learn and may want close supervision, immediate feedback, and the reassuring presence of an authority figure directing their process. Asian youth, for example, may shy away from the kind of independent thinking Westerner's value. Sometimes groups need to be encouraged to move out of the brainstorming phase (RO) and into the application phase (AE). They may lack basic information, for example, how to access resources. Group safety must also be developed in order for young people to take the necessary risks in presenting their own life as a case study.

Conclusion

Case studies can promote the brainstorming of possibilities and serve as a means for encouraging young people to take a role in learning by stimulating their curiosity in an engaging way. When young people learn to creatively think about the possibilities for other youths' lives, they are more likely to apply the process to their own lives.

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